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Commission on the Status of Women
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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls

Ministerial round tables: good practices in the empowerment of rural women and girls, including through access to education, infrastructure and technology, food security and nutrition

Chairs' summary

1. On 12 March 2018, the Commission on the Status of Women held two ministerial round tables on the topic "Good practices in the empowerment of rural women and girls, including through access to education, infrastructure and technology, food security and nutrition", under the priority theme "Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls". The participants in the round tables exchanged experiences, lessons learned and good practices in relation to the topic, with an emphasis on actions taken by Governments to ensure that rural women and girls have access to affordable, quality education, essential infrastructure and technology, including sustainable energy and information and communication technology, and adequate, quality food and nutrition.

2. The Minister of Culture of Estonia, Indrek Saar, chaired the first round table and made introductory comments. Ministers and high-level government officials from 21 Member States participated in the first round table. The Cabinet Secretary for Public Service, Youth and Gender Affairs of Kenya, Margaret Kobia, chaired the second round table and made introductory comments. Ministers and high-level government officials from 17 Member States participated in the second round table.

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Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) Yannick Glemarec made closing comments.

Measures to ensure access to and completion of education by rural women and girls

3. In their interventions, participants shared their experiences, lessons learned and good practices on successful policies and programmes to increase access by rural women and girls to education. Participants called for increasing budgetary allocations to build new schools and rehabilitate old ones in rural areas in order to increase the access of women and girls to educational and training opportunities. Scholarships, school feeding and transportation programmes were highlighted as successful measures to encourage more women and girls living in rural areas to attend school and to reduce school dropout rates. A major concern was the lack of concrete action to address early marriage and teenage pregnancy. Participants called for more national dialogues and campaigns to facilitate changes in attitudes towards access by girls to education, especially in male-dominated science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields.

4. Participants emphasized the importance of improving the quality of education for women and girls in rural areas. Measures towards that end included providing a safe learning environment for women and girls, improving sanitation in schools, providing free sanitary pads, leveraging technology, and reforming and improving teacher training. Participants noted that such measures also increased learning opportunities and outcomes for rural women and girls in a changing world. The introduction of financial incentives such as free housing and salary bonuses was presented as a means to attract good teachers to remote rural villages.

Investments to ensure essential infrastructure for the benefit of rural women and girls

5. Participants drew attention to the importance of promoting and developing sustainable energy, water and sanitation, transportation, information and communications technology, education and health infrastructure to accelerate progress on poverty reduction and enhance access by rural women and girls to basic services. Increased investment in rural roads enhanced the ability of women to travel and perform activities related to household production and income generation. Participants emphasized the need to increase investment in electricity grids, water and sanitation infrastructure, and time- and labour-saving technologies, to alleviate the burden of unpaid care and domestic work on women and girls in rural areas.

6. Participants expressed concern about the significant challenges caused by climate change and called for urgent action to mitigate the negative impact of extreme weather patterns and build the resilience of rural communities. Participants discussed the critical need to increase investment in maintaining and upgrading rural roads and bridges in order to improve access by rural women and girls to services, including health-care services. Participants also stressed improving school infrastructure, including by increasing access to electricity, information and communications technology, and water and sanitation, as crucial for the well-being of rural girls and young women in the learning environment.

Information and communications technology and other technology for rural women and girls

7. Participants emphasized that access to information and communications technology and other technology was a key tool for empowering women and girls in rural areas and achieving sustainable development. They described a wide range of programmes tailored to schools, families, community centres and women's centres, including in rural, poor and indigenous communities and areas. Digital inclusion was being addressed through advances in infrastructure for information and communications technology, including high-coverage broadband services, mobile phones and mobile hotspots. The need for widespread access to computers, by ensuring one laptop or tablet for every child, was stressed. Participants noted that, in educational systems, early access to information and communications technology, skills development, and information and communications technology centres in secondary schools could bridge the digital divides between rural and urban areas and between girls and boys.

8. Participants drew attention to projects focused on marginalized families and communities where access by women to information and communications technology was facilitated through women's and community centres, with positive effects on the empowerment of women. Participants referred to mobile banking and online information portals for the start-up of businesses and for business development planning as tools that could improve financial security and entrepreneurship among women. Participants viewed the use of information and communications technology and other technology as enabling easier access to public services and better service delivery in rural areas, including health care and real-time support for women and girl victims of violence.

Policies to ensure access by rural women and girls to food and nutrition

9. Participants highlighted land ownership and rights, as well as access to financial services, agricultural inputs and processing, and information on markets and business development, as key for increasing the agricultural productivity of rural women and ensuring food security. Speakers noted that an integrated approach to addressing poverty and ensuring adequate nutrition for children would incorporate universal school attendance and school canteen meals for children on a permanent basis at the primary and secondary levels. Participants drew attention to projects connecting women's ownership of resources and control over agricultural processes with efforts to protect the environment, including by training women on sustainable agricultural production.